As a public servant, every day I am confronted with many serious problems, often with no clear solution. Once in awhile, however, I come upon a problem that actually can be fixed, if only we summon the necessary will and resources. The scourge of unexploded ordnance in Laos—remnants of a war that ended decades ago, but still kills innocent civilians today—is just such a problem.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of participating in a Congressional Delegation to Laos along with my colleagues Congressmen Eni Faleomavaega and Anh Cao, the first such trip composed entirely of Members of Congress whose roots are from the Asia Pacific region. We were there to address U.S. foreign policy with respect to Laos on a number of different issues, but I will never forget our visit with the government officials responsible for overseeing bomb clearance work in Laos.

What I learned during our visit shocked me.

As part of its efforts during the Vietnam War, the United States began a nine-year bombing campaign in Laos in 1964 that ultimately dropped 260 million cluster bombs on the country – the most heavily bombed country in history. That's over 2.5 million tons of munitions, more than what the US dropped in WWII on Germany and Japan combined.

When the bombs hit the ground, many of these weapons did not blow up as designed, but instead remained hidden—waiting for an unsuspecting farmer or student. Of the 75 million bombs that failed to detonate, less than 1 percent has been cleared. At least 25,000 people have been killed or injured by these bombs in the 35 years following the end of the bombing

campaign. Today, an average of 300 Lao people are injured or killed by these weapons every year.

Beyond these devastating human casualties, the economy has become a casualty. Laos's economy is almost entirely based on agricultural production (rice in particular), yet one-third of the land remains littered with unexplored ordnance. Clearance costs and security concerns continue to pose a barrier to farmers large and small, leaving fertile soil untilled and an agricultural economy underutilized.

I was stunned by these facts, but also heartened by the response.

During our meetings in Laos, we learned that today about 1,000 workers are destroying ordnance and leading education programs throughout the country. The bomb removal program in Laos is effective and efficient, called the "gold standard" by the State Department's own weapons removal and abatement office. The removal process works, but it is expensive—and more funding is needed now to prevent further casualties.

This month, under the leadership of Representative Faleomavaega, as Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment, the U.S. House of Representatives will be conducting hearings on the legacy of the U.S. bombing of Laos. The Foreign Affairs Committee will hear from representatives of the State Department, as well as the NGO community, about the extent of the problem, the progress that has been

made so far to address it, and the U.S. contribution to that effort.

So far, the U.S. has contributed an average of about $3 million a year to bomb removal efforts in Laos. In contrast, the U.S. spent more than $2 million a day (about $17 million in today's dollars) dropping the bombs in the first place.

We have a moral obligation to fix this problem.

But first we need funds to fix it. This year, as a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I requested $7 million in the Fiscal Year 2011 budget (sustaining or increasing this figure over the coming years) and urged the State Department to make a sustained commitment to bomb removal in Laos. Just a small increase in U.S. funding would have a huge impact for the people suffering from the hidden remnants of the Vietnam War in Laos.

During our visit, we committed to the government of Laos to assist the country in its bomb removal effort. It's time we followed through on that commitment, and solved this problem, once and for all.